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A GREEK REVIEW OF MIDDLE EASTERN AFFAIRS

Syria: A Middle East Janus?



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Greece and Syria: Strategic Dialogue Now

Sotiris Roussos *

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Relations between Syria and Greece were and still are, for the Greek part, built on a myth well established and well propagated among Greek politicians, journalists and foreign policy analysts. As this long-standing myth has it, Syria could have been a vital ally of Greece right at Turkey's underbelly and thus every Turkish-Syrian co-operation, not to say alliance, is wrongly perceived as detrimental to Greek and Greek-Cypriot interests in the region. The problem with this myth is that Syria never had the intention or the capacity to enter in an alliance with Greece against Turkey. Nonetheless, Greek foreign policy towards Syria in the 1980s and 1990s was designed in order to thwart Syrian-Turkish close bilateral and regional co-operation. Such an aim is by default unattainable, more so since Syria and Turkey share interests and threats in the same region and thus an understanding is always to

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be sought by both parties. Greek foreign policy remained trapped in this misconception and failed to develop other fields of co-operation with Syria.

Syria is more like Janus, with one face looking eastward to Mesopotamia and the Arabian deserts and the other looking westward to the Mediterranean. This very nature has determined not only its geopolitical destiny but its social fabric and cultural formation also. The First World War and the new borders with Turkey, Iraq and Palestine/Israel/Jordan severed old trade and social networks and roads and the creation of an independent Lebanon led to rupture with Syria's Mediterranean connection. From then onwards Syria vacillated between east and west, Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. Turkey, Iran or Saudi Arabia might have been partners for the East but Greece and Cyprus can be partners for the Mediterranean face of the country.

In a few words, Greece and Cyprus can offer Syria an indispensable link to Mediterranean networks of finance, transport, energy, science, green technology and culture. Moreover, Greece can offer Syria a way out from international isolation with fairness and dignity. Greek policy can work in an intensive and discrete manner in order to assist closer ties between Syria and the E.U. as well as membership of Syria in various Mediterranean Partnerships, such as the OSCE Mediterranean Partners. Syria and Greece can, in the same pattern of regional co-operation, launch an Eastern Mediterranean Initiative for Water, Environment and Green Economy.

Syria, Greece and Cyprus can be the hubs of new transport, energy and green economy networks linking Syria with the Eastern and South Eastern Europe, not necessarily to rival those transport and energy networks run via Turkey but to become parallel and perhaps intertwined with them, increasing the volume of exchanges between the two regions.

What Greece is expecting from Syria is for it to become a platform for Greek and Cypriot investments and products in the Greater Middle East from the Mediterranean shore to the Gulf. Still, it is easier to say than to implement such a policy and the key for the implementation is the re-opening of Volos-Latakia shipping line. This line can be the basis of a much broader network, which can include Cyprus, Lebanon, Egypt and Turkey.

Last, but not least, academic co-operation could and should go beyond the formal frameworks of bilateral agreements, initiating a strategic dialogue between various Universities and Research Centres in both countries. This strategic dialogue would include, beyond discussion of regional and international politics, the fields of environment and water resources, information technology, transport, global and regional economy and of course culture. Such a program of strategic dialogue should start immediately, ushering long, fruitful relations beyond myths and misconceptions. ■

The dubious shape of things to come in Syria

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Alexia Liakounakou



Syria has been placed amongst the key players in the political chessboard that is the Middle East. It has gained stability and a regional prominence, on the one hand, but it has also faced growing economic pressures which have led various commentators to suggest that it may ‘crumble from within’. What the future holds for Syria is not easily predicted but it seems that recent developments on international and regional levels may force the regime to consider deeper reforms. It is, however, a time to ask: is Syria really a ‘crumbling’ case or is that wishful thinking on the part of western diplomacy?

Syria has been described by many western commentators as being 'afraid of change'. Yet, in a country with immense ethnic plurality and with the potential of playing a brokering role in the politics of the Middle East, Syria has managed to keep a largely powerful grip on its domestic affairs. This success was initiated in the 1970s via a nationally unifying programme under senior Asad's Ba'athist government which, although restrictive and militarized in character, permitted less space for outside meddling in its internal affairs by creating an image of a revitalized, prospering nation. It is in the last decade, however, that uncertainty has arisen about whether the state is able to continue to handle the various economic and political challenges originating both inside and outside the Syrian border.

Hafiz died in 2000, and his son Bashar al-Assad succeeded him after some initial hesitation expressed by various Ba'athist officials. Many have noted that this change in presidency took place at a pivotal time, when Syria was standing at a crossroads in matters social and political. Internal uprisings had been suppressed under senior Asad's government, but the ideas that fostered them continued to run deep within networks of Syrian society. Immediately following senior Asad's death Syria underwent various internal shocks, when the *Damascus Spring* (a domestic movement led by intellectuals and leftist thinkers) brought internal problems to the fore in the form of public debate. During this intellectual –and subsequently popular– uprising, pivotal issues of suppression in freedom of speech and state censorship of the media were criticized. These efforts of publicly expressing the state's shortcomings were subsequently joined by various movements, both religious (as in the example of the incorporation of the Muslim Brotherhood in the movement) and secular, creating a mobilization whose scale was unprecedented under the Ba'ath.

The response of junior Asad's government was a quick crackdown on such movements through tightened control by security forces and numerous imprisonments. More importantly, this reaction suggested a retreat from

the much awaited reform process which Bashar's succession seems to have heralded in the beginning. Nevertheless, the state did not seal its ears completely to the population's demands, since it felt its supremacy was threatened domestically. In the past decade, a flow of international newspapers has been able to reach the country (albeit state-controlled and owned by the ruling elites) and it permitted private satellite TV channels to be broadcast within Syria (usually by Gulf countries' private companies). The censoring of specific web locations on the internet was still however in place, but the internet proves to be an avenue of continuous innovation and growth, with websites blossoming and providing new escape to Syrians wishing to access banned material, and with blogging largely becoming a very popular trend all over the Middle East, as a means of expression for Arabs and other groups under censorship.

Finally, due to a deteriorating (but more or less stable) economy, mediocre reforms were unavoidably called for. Such changes were first seen in the enlargement of the private sector, in the slow incorporation of foreign investment in the domestic market and the less accentuated 'isolation' of Syria towards the EU and international financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank. Easing its stance towards the international market and foreign relations with the west, Syria has relied on oil exports and agricultural exports respectively. The oil revenues account for more than 25% of its GDP, but it is estimated that by 2015 it may have to import oil. Agriculture is the second life-giving sector to the Syrian economy, accounting for 19.2% of the GDP, but it is largely unpredictable as it relies on rainfall which has deteriorated in the past decade due to rising global temperature levels, resulting in food insecurity. Droughts are very common and on the rise. The drought in July 2009 which led hundreds of people to abandon their villages raises serious questions about the future of Syria's economy and its potential for overcoming stagnation, unless it opens up more to international markets. The private sector has been opening up recently, but if it continues to grow, state control will

unavoidably lose its grip on the presently state-run economy, which will in turn bring political consequences as well. Opening up its market may lead to more than money flowing into the country and such waves of change may threaten the present government and its domestic legitimacy.

However, it seems that the idea of a 'failing Ba'athist regime' is propagated more in the west than locally. Bashar al-Asad has been in power for nine years now, and although Syria is facing real and threatening challenges, it is still standing on its feet while paving a way which combines strictness (characteristic of older Ba'athist ways) and newer strategies to tackle social and economic problems. These, although possibly not completely innovative or a 100% satisfactory to its population, seem to work out for the time being. Syria has still retained its key role in the region and still upholds notions of unity amongst Arabs and non-Arabs in the Middle East against foreign threats (most notably, Israel). Moreover, even though it has lost territory (the Golan Heights) to Israel since 1967 and its direct control of Lebanon since 2005, it still has powerful outlets through its alliance with Iran and its recent warming-up to Turkey. Consequently, it could be misleading to suppose that Ba'athist ideology is slowly failing, as most western views seem to support. Its lessening of stiffness in diplomatic conversation with the west may indicate fragility, but this trait is counterbalanced with its alliance to Iran and a relative economic independency which, until now at least, is supported by oil and agriculture export revenues. The Ba'ath, moreover, has been the symbol of national unity and its disintegration may be a lot less feasible (for now, at least) than what it seems.

Although the current government has eased its stance comparatively to Hafiz al-Asad's government, the changes that have slowly entered Syria do not seem to be enough to reassure those demanding more. Nonetheless, there seems to be much at stake if Syria is to change completely, or if it is to face a new government under a different party formation. First of all, to which direction will it go? There is not one single voice heard that advocates change, but many different strands that call for ideological

and political reform, propagated by many different groups (various movements that are either religious, secular or ethnic in orientation) without showing signs of being united enough as to break contemporary power formations. The Islamist takeover seems to be an option for many, but the harmonious cohabitation of various religions, to date, seems to be a trait for which Syrians are proud of. Thus, an Islamic state would go against the grain for a large part of the Syrian population, both rural and urban. It is possibly, therefore, for all the above reasons that the state is not yet forced to consider full reform and stays within the limits of small changes and smooth, censored transitions. Finally, it seems that for the current government economic safety is much more of a priority than the various social, ethnic and religious issues at stake.

Moreover, it is sometimes the case that economic and regional insecurity calls for something besides change; it may call for supporting the familiar. Thus it may be safer for a large portion of the population to cling to what is presently in place, to the more familiarly stable. Outside threats (such as Israel or the 'west') are a common denominator for all Syrians who might, at the end of the day, adhere to ideas of Syrian or regional unity to feel stronger (feelings presently directed towards the Ba'athist government) and this sentiment may overtake the feeling of disappointment with the authoritarian regime. The Ba'ath has undeniably shaped modern Syria and has kept Israel at a distance. This is something Syrians in their majority seem to respect. It is through this legitimacy and regional alliances that the Ba'ath may thus continue to lead for years to come, unless even more threatening problems surface. On the other hand, it is equally possible that a new force, either Islamic or more secular in character, may arise in the near future to replace the Ba'ath. The Middle East as a whole is susceptible to immense change as it holds the key to the world's most contemporarily valued resource -oil- and represents the core of the hottest political, religious and territorial debates since the mid twentieth century. ■

The fate of Lebanon

Styliani Saliari



The launching of the Cedar Revolution triggered by former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri's assassination and driven by the March 14 alliance was perceived as a turning point in Lebanon's history as it terminated nearly 30 years of Syrian presence. However, it seems that the March 14 Forces, which coined the rallying cry 'freedom, sovereignty and independence' and reached their peak of power in 2005 by becoming the dominant group in Lebanon's elections, are losing ground. Precisely, Syria is once again considered as an essential part of the country's stability and its turbulent and never-ending jigsaw.

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According to the Taif agreement which put an end to Lebanon's civil war and was signed on October 22, 1989, Syria was supposed to withdraw its troops from Lebanon's soil over a two-year period. But it stayed, for another 15 years, in which among other things Lebanon's constitution was altered several times according to Syria's wishes and governments were formed only in accordance with the head of Syria's security apparatus. All in all, Damascus controlled Lebanon's affairs for nearly 30 years.

However, when former Prime Minister Rafik al-Hariri, a close ally to the Saudi monarchy and friend of France's then President Jacques Chirac, was murdered on February 14, 2005, waves of protest spread all over the country, accusing Syria of Hariri's assassination. Eventually, Syria was forced to withdraw, in what became known as the Cedar Revolution. It goes without saying that France and the U.S. played a major role in Syria's retreat.

Since Syria's withdrawal, Lebanon has been divided into two different camps: the March 14 alliance, or the so-called Western-backed coalition, and the Hizbullah-led March 8 alliance, backed by Iran and Syria. In May 2008, Hizbullah and its allies clashed with militias of the March 14 alliance; an event that brought back haunting memories of the civil war. Nonetheless during the same month, the political crisis could be resolved by the Doha accord which resulted in the formation of a national unity government.

On June 7, 2009, the March 14 Forces won the Lebanese parliamentary elections. The winning alliance headed by Saad al-Hariri won 71 seats in the 128-members parliament against 57 for the opposition led by Hizbullah. Five months later, on November 9, 2009 after immense 'wrangling' Lebanon has again a national unity government. The new cabinet consists of 15 ministers from Hariri's bloc and 10 from the opposition while the remaining 5 ministers have been appointed by President Michel Sleiman; he will play the arbiter in the new government as no party will have veto power.

Before the parliamentary elections Hariri had repeatedly stated that his party would not enter into a coalition government; however, it now seems as if the Doha agreement is the only document that is still powerful and able to preserve the internal power-balance that was created by the May 7, 2008 events.

Just three days after the formation of the Lebanese government the Lebanese President Sleiman met his Syrian counterpart in Damascus, in his second visit to Syria since his May 2008 election. During his first visit, both Presidents had agreed to establish full diplomatic relations for the first time since their independence from French colonial power in the 1940s.

During their second meeting, both Presidents 'vowed' to continue coordination between both countries amid signs of improved relations. Particularly, Asad addressed the rival parties in Lebanon by saying that they should 'take advantage of the current positive atmosphere and to continue dialogue so as to strengthen Lebanese understanding and unity as a basis for stability'. Sleiman, on the other hand, hailed 'the privileged relations with Syria, which are in the interests of Lebanon.' Both agreed to 'continue consultations, coordination and cooperation'.

Moreover, Prime Minister Hariri received a telegram of congratulations from his Syrian counterpart Mohammed Najj Otri on November 12, 2009. It represents the first official message from Syria to Hariri, who has so far had tense relations with his Syrian neighbor partly due to his father's assassination in 2005. Precisely, in the past, the March 14 alliance had expressed its conviction that the Syrian regime was involved in the murder of Rafik al-Hariri; it 'fought' a two-year campaign for the establishment of the international tribunal for the investigation of Hariri's assassination. Additionally, the March 14 Forces called for Hizbullah's disarmament, daring to enter into direct confrontation with the movement. However, right now, all eyes are on Hariri as it seems inevitable for him not to visit Syria.

Hence, it seems as if Syria is steadily coming back into the game. Precisely, the recent political stalemate over Lebanon's government was seen as evidence of how one side can dominate political developments in Lebanon. Hariri attempted to form a national unity government by including Hizbullah and its allies. However, negotiations stagnated as no agreement could be reached over who would receive which cabinet position. Particularly, Lebanese Christian leader General Aoun, who has been allied with Hizbullah since 2006, claimed that his son-in-law, Jibrán Bassil, should receive the telecommunications ministry, a delicate post due to its security connections. The March 14 alliance refused, however, the March 8 alliance stated that it would not join the government unless Aoun's demands were fulfilled. Only when the Western-backed coalition addressed most of the opposition's demands, did the March 8 alliance 'fall into line'. Notably, Jibrán Bassil received the energy portfolio while the communications portfolio was given to another of Aoun's representatives, Charles Nahas. The only claim with which Hariri did not comply was the demand to make Bassil communications minister.

Inextricably linked to the solving of Lebanon's political stalemate is, according to Nicolas Nassif (a regular columnist for the oppositionist Lebanese daily Al-Akhbar) the October 7-8, 2009 summit between Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz. During the landmark two-day visit the Saudi King expressed his wish for Syria to regain its former role in Lebanon. 'A national unity government is the basis for stability, unity and strength in Lebanon,' Syria's state news agency SANA quoted both Presidents.

Syria and Saudi Arabia have had tense relations since 2005 mainly due to Rafik al-Hariri's assassination. Moreover, both countries back different factions in the Palestinian territories: Syria supports Hamas and Saudi Arabia supports Fatah. It seems, however, that recent developments in the Middle East such as Iran's growing strength, the Shi'a Yemenite threat to

Saudi Arabia, the consolidation of the Shi'a regime in Iraq are all linked to the perception that Syria 'is now the core of the Arab world' just to mention Assad's meetings with the Prime Minister of Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, Spain and recently France have led to a change in Saudi Arabia. In other words, Saudi Arabia has come to the conclusion that it would be in its best interest to hold talks toward rapprochement with Syria. Hence, Saudi Arabia put pressure on the March 14 alliance 'to make concessions in a deal that would bring Lebanon under Syrian control again'.

Thus, it appears that Hariri's movement is losing ground something which Lebanon's chameleon Walid Jumblatt, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), Druze leader and quite famous for his several political transformations, must have noticed early enough. His recent flip-flop on August 2, 2009 – he quit the pro-Western coalition – and his calls for 'distinctive relations' with Syria illustrate this pretty well. Like Hariri, he has a reason to 'despise' Syria as he accused it of murdering his



father, Kamal Jumblatt, in 1977. However, he did not break openly with Hafiz al-Asad until Rafik al-Hariri's assassination. Championing the movement that led to Syria's retreat from Lebanese soil in 2005 and turning attention to Syria before the June 7, 2009 parliamentary elections by saying, 'None of the Lebanese are our enemies ... but we will not compromise or apologize when it comes to the Syrian regime ... Alongside Israel, our enemies are tyrannical regimes that want to block our progress and development,' he now calls for a Syrian-Lebanese cooperation. In particular, he states, that 'Syria is the core of the Arab world and Lebanon is destined to be on its side'. If he had spoken once in a bad way about Bashar al-Asad, it was only in the 'heat of emotion', Jumblatt told Al-Manar, the Hizbolah-run television station. It all looks like as if Hizbullah will keep its weapons and that the March 14 alliance will not push for any further investigations which will

associate Syria with Rafik al-Hariri's assassination. Furthermore, no one would be surprised if Jumblatt joined the March 8 alliance. Syria is growing strong again and it seems as if its constant stubbornness over several issues such as Israel (it hosts Hamas' exiled leadership) or its constant support of Hizbullah finally pays off. It is widely accepted that Syria is an important player in the Middle Eastern region as it is the puppet master of several groups and developments in the region; something that cannot be denied when considering the recent developments in Lebanon. One might say that there cannot be peace in the region without Syria.

Nothing illustrates this better than the meeting between French President Nicolas Sarkozy and Bashar al-Asad on November 13, 2009 in Paris. Sarkozy is trying to convince Syria to renew talks with its 'arch foe' Israel as Syria plays a huge role in the stalemate between the Israelis and Palestinians since it supports Hizbullah and Hamas. This is inextricably linked to Lebanon's stability. In other words, a strong Lebanese state can only emerge if among other things Hizbullah lays down its weapons. However, this is unlikely to happen as long as there is no peace agreement between Syria and Israel while the latter returns the Golan Heights which were captured by Israel in 1967 and annexed in 1981. By supporting Hizbullah, Syria has bargaining power when it comes to the Golan Heights and to Arab/Israeli peace respectively. On the other hand, Hizbullah's legitimacy is based on the existence of Israel as the so-called 'other', i.e. without Israel as the enemy number one there would not be resistance in the first place. Nevertheless, the future outcome of these talks is unknown and therefore Lebanon continues to function as a 'proxy' nation that opposing powers use in order to reach their goals while the fulfilment of the March 14 alliance's rallying cry 'freedom, sovereignty and independence' has been postponed to an unknown date. ■

Syrian gambling on the Palestinian front

Marina Eleftheriadou

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Syria has been involved in the Palestinian question since its inception. Over the years the nature of this involvement has changed. Nowadays Damascus is no less dependent on its current Palestinian protege, Hamas, than Hamas is on Damascus. Whether either of them can survive a break up of their relationship will be a mirroring of their parallel affairs with the other players in the region.



defense and president respectively) to remove the ‘Zionist obstacle’ for the establishment of *Bilad al-Sham* (Greater Syria) that would include Lebanon, Israel, West Bank, Gaza and Jordan, Asad’s strategic discernment made him realize that another path should be pursued. Contrary to popular belief, the Golan at that time was only a part of Syria’s aspirations. Asad had bigger plans. However, regional pre-eminence required a dominant position in the Levant

For Syria’s longtime previous ruler, Hafiz al-Asad, the Palestinian problem was too important to be left to the Palestinians. After three failed attempts (the last two, in 1967 and 1973, with Asad as minister of

which in turn required careful dealing with the increasingly powerful Israel. Accordingly, the pan-Arabist ideology espoused by the Ba’ath placed high importance

on Palestine, prescribing thus a similar course. As the conventional balance between the two powers was more and more unfavorable (despite the massive influx of soviet weapons) and the other players were abandoning the struggle, the weaker pawns, Lebanon and Palestine, had to be manipulated into a 'perpetual check' against Israel. Lebanon's endemic instability and fluid alliances were an easy task for an ablest tactician like Asad. The Palestinians' clinging to independent decision-making, however, was more challenging. Neither stooges such as as-Saiqa or later Abu Nidal nor efforts to sow dissidence within Fatah (the 1983 Abu Musa movement) could damage the PLO.

The first serious setback in this strategy occurred with the Oslo Accords (and to a lesser extent the Taif Agreement in Lebanon). Syria initially assumed that the PLO, after its forced exile in Tunis, could easily fall under the Syrian orbit of influence. Contrary to Syrian plans, however, the PLO reappeared strengthened. Thus, after a bilateral understanding with Israel, and most detrimentally to Damascus' interests, the regional Madrid process which Syria could influence was being undermined. Hafiz al-Asad's first reaction was to lambast Arafat's treason to the Palestinian and Arab cause (a thaw in their relations came only after Hafiz's death in 2000 when Arafat attended his funeral) and to reassert Syria's support to the rejectionist groups who in the meantime, being seriously weakened, had scattered in the Middle East. In the end, however, Asad realized that the opportunity gap was narrowing and also opted for a bilateral formula to regain -at least- the Golan.

The second blow to Syria's Levant strategy came after 9/11 and the subsequent confluence of negative

developments for Syria. Under the 'axis of evil' tag Syria's new inexperienced ruler Bashir al-Asad was thrown to the diplomatic vultures. Not only was Syria waiting its turn for the US' Middle Eastern 'democratic frenzy' but it was also 'kicked out' of its backyard, Lebanon. On the Palestinian front, Hafiz al-Asad's decision to shelter the exiled Hamas leadership when it was expelled from Jordan in 1999 now seemed more like a burden than an asset. The US administration repeatedly condemned Syria's policy of 'harboring terrorists' and providing them with operational support. Sanctions were mentioned in June 2002 as a possible countermeasure and finally were enacted in 2004 (Syria's Accountability Act). At the same time, Israel, who had correctly read Damascus' weakness, relocated the battlefield on Syria's ground. In August 2003 Israeli jets overflew Asad's summer residence in Lattakia as a response to an Islamic Jihad suicide attack in Jerusalem. In October 2003 an old PLFP-GC training camp was bombed. It was the first time since the 1973 war that a target inside Syria was hit. In September 2004 a top-ranking Hamas leader, Izzuddin Al-Sheikh Khalil, was murdered in Damascus. In June 2006, Israeli planes paid a second visit to Asad's Lattakia home after the capture of Gilad Shalit. The list also includes two incidents not directly linked to the Palestinian issue: the February 2008 assassination of Hizbullah's Imad Mughnieh and the bombing of allegedly nuclear facilities in September 2007. Under direct attack Syria showed nothing but restraint. Damascus' policy of *mumana'a* (passive resistance) as a method of promoting *muqawama* (active resistance) had evolved into full-fledged inactivity or apparent submissiveness. Every time the pressure mounted, the Syrian regime

hinted through controlled leaks that the Hamas operatives were asked to curb their media and political activities or even that their offices were closed and they had left the country. When the tensions cooled down, Syrian officials refuted the claims.

Despite all the problems Hamas presence created, Syria could not disassociate itself from the organization if it wished to have a footing in Palestinian politics and by extension a bargaining chip in the Israeli-Syrian talks. Relations with Fatah improved under Bashar al-Asad. Fatah offices in Damascus opened again in 2003 after twenty years. Mahmoud Abbas, soon after his election as PA's President, visited Damascus and since then has made stops in the Syrian capital on several occasions. However, in no manner could Syria hope to bring Fatah under its wings, simply because Fatah didn't need Syria's protection. Syria's importance laid elsewhere; in its influence over Hamas. And Damascus' steadfastness started to bear fruits after Hamas's victory in the January 2006 parliamentary elections and further on after the June 2007 takeover of Gaza. As Hamas was getting stronger, so was Syria. Damascus could present itself as an influential spoiler but at the same time as a linchpin of a possible solution. Although the February 2007 Saudi-sponsored Mecca agreement for a Palestinian unity government showed that perhaps Syria is not the best option in terms of a solution, Syria's effort to sabotage the Annapolis Conference in November 2007 by staging a counter-conference in Damascus with all the rejectionist forces, showed that it certainly can be a spoiler. The anti-Annapolis conference was finally postponed when Syria decided to send a delegation to the US.

The Gaza war highlighted this perception to the fullest. During the siege several foreign delegations vis-

ited Damascus to ask Bashar al-Asad to exert his influence on Hamas; among them French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Russian President's Special Envoy for Middle Eastern Affairs Alexander Sultanov, Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and a British parliamentary delegation. This flurry of diplomatic activity continued in the next months. While the diplomatic reception room, covered with dust for so many years, was brought back to life, an article in May 2009 appeared on Asia Times Online claiming that, once again, Syria was ready to expel Hamas from the country. The validity of this claim is highly doubtful as the name of the author is not disclosed as cited for personal security issues and there isn't another source to uphold this allegation. However, it brings up perhaps the most pivotal question in their relationship: who needs whom the most.

Syria on its own is no threat to Israel; it can barely be a nuisance. That means that if it wants to strike a deal on the Golan, Damascus needs either Hizbullah or Hamas and Iran (albeit on a different level). Hizbullah needs Syria as a transit route from Iran but it probably can survive without this as it has a strong foothold in Lebanon and the country's instability allows other smuggling options. Syria also needs a Sunni ally in order not to lose its touch with the Arab world (as part of the Iranian axis). Damascus in the last months has wisely used Hamas to improve its relations with the other Arab powers. It's not an accident that during the Gaza war Damascus refrained to attack the Arab governments for their lack of support to Hamas as it had done during the Lebanon war. The only exception was Egypt, but in this case the animosity is deep-rooted and, anyway, the 'Arab street' demanded that some-



Sudan's interfighting. His return to Gaza, if allowed by Israel and Egypt, will not only put it at Israel's gunpoint but will also sever to a great extent its communication channels with the rest of the world. Qatar, which has been increasingly supportive and has welcomed Khaled Meshal on its soil several times, is doubtful to accept a permanent presence given its relationship with the US. Jordan, which in 2008 tried to mend its relations with Hamas as a result of Abbas's weakness and the fear that the 'Jordanian

one slammed Cairo for not opening the Rafah crossing. When and if Syria manages to improve its relations with the Arab states, reverse its seclusion from international community and get a credible promise regarding Golan under US guarantees, Damascus will be ready to sell out Hamas. A more puzzling question is whether Iran will allow Syria to follow this path.

Hamas's position is analogous. Under current circumstances, if its exiled leadership is ousted from Syria, the only real option left is Iran, and that would be suicide. Sudan, which is usually referred to as an alternative to Syria, is a death-trap. Khaled Meshal survived in 1997 from the Israeli attempt to poison him in Jordan when King Husayn, with the intervention of Bill Clinton, forced Israel to provide him with the antidote. Unfortunately, no antidote will be available if he is butchered in

option' was back on the table, reversed the process during the Gaza war because it realized that the Palestinian combined with Islamist feelings were threatening the delicate political balance in the kingdom. So, until Hamas improves its internal (possibly through a beneficial power-sharing agreement with Fatah, yet to be reached), regional and international standing, it has to respect its host's interests as there is no acceptable alternative. In politics oaths of loyalty from here to eternity are not valid. In the post-Gaza-war, post-Bush era a diplomatic race between Syria and Hamas is unfolding. The second one to cross the finishing line will either have no home to return to or will find its house occupied. ■

Out of the *shadows*, Syria leaps into the LIMELIGHT

Ilias Tasopoulos

Changing regional conditions have made Syria confident enough to feel that it could draw from a pool of potential allies.

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Syria met the challenges originating from global and regional changes in the 1990s. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, the peace talks after the 1991 Gulf war transformed Syria's strategic environment. The Soviet Union, widely perceived as a "superpower" for over 40 years, had been a major Syrian ally not least because it was the prime source of armaments for Damascus. Syria could also count on the Kremlin when things came to a head in the Arab-Israeli conflict, although the Soviets did not always comply with Syria's wishes.

After 1991 Syria responded successfully to international system pressures. It climbed on the American bandwagon by cooperating with the United States in the Gulf war and taking part in the subsequent peace talks. Bilateral relations under the Clinton administration indicated that Syria and the US could find a common ground for cooperation while Syrian officials maintained their long-standing ties with the former Eastern Bloc. Relations with Europe were not left behind. In May 1998, Syria started formal negotiations with the European Union for the signing of a Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement, after Hafiz al-Asad decided to participate in the Barcelona Process.

Bashar al-Asad's ascent to power in Damascus coincided with a turn-around in the fortunes of Syria. Following the collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process in the first days of the year 2000 the United States adopted a much harder stance toward Syria. The election of George W. Bush to the US presidency, along with the rising influence of Republican Party members labeled as neoconservatives in the higher echelons of the US administration, hardened Syrian-American relations and signaled an era of rough diplomacy.

Syria was thus no more able to draw a patron-superpower into its conflicts to protect its interests as much as it used to in the past. The Syrian regime did not feel paralysed by these events, but rather the converse. Damascus approached Baghdad in an effort to strengthen regional alliances and a few months later Iraq begun pumping crude oil to Syria through a restored pipeline, upgrading its economic relations with its previously rival neighbor. In parallel with its attempt to cooperate with other Arab states as a means to avoid isolation, Bashar al-Asad attempted to reaffirm the importance of the special relationship between Syria and Iran, as the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem has described it. Asad became the first foreign head of state to visit Mahmoud Ahmadinejad after his election to the Presidency of Iran, while Syria and Iran signed a "strategic cooperation" agreement in 2004.

Damascus initially adopted a more accommodative posture towards Washington when the Bush administration launched the global “War on Terror”. Syria offered its cooperation in the ‘battle’ against extremist groups by providing intelligence on al-Qaeda operatives to the US; the Syrian regime had little love for them, anyhow. Nevertheless in 2002 Syria joined France and other European states in voting the UN Security Council Resolution 1441, calling for Iraq to give weapons’ inspectors unfettered access. The unanimous passage of this Resolution was seen as an attempt to prevent an upcoming war in the region. Syria and the United States found themselves on a collision course by that time.

International pressure mounted when the United Nations Security Council approved Resolution 1559 in 2004, calling for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, and Syria found itself in a difficult position. The signing of the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement had been indefinitely postponed, even though the EU and Syria had reached an agreement. Member states of the European Union that allied with the US (such as the United Kingdom and Netherlands) torpedoed the agreement by pushing for an inclusion of a clause about weapons of mass destruction. After the assassination of Lebanese-Saudi millionaire Rafiq Hariri, France, Syria and the United States coalesced into a front that pressed for the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon. The eventual withdrawal of the Syrian troops from Lebanon in 2005 was a heavy blow to Syria’s regional status, even if a massive redeployment had already started in the previous



years according to sources favorably disposed toward the Syrian regime. The regime seemed to bow under pressure and Syria’s meagre revenues suffered in these years from the imposed isolation. It then seemed as if the regime would not be able to survive for long.

Still, changing regional conditions in the next years once more provided Syria with the opportunity to play its role as a regional power. Syrian allies seemed to be thriving. Hizbullah, the Lebanese organization supported by Syria and Iran, came out a winner from the 2006 summer war with Israel, proving that it could stand up to the Israeli threat. Iran, on its part, had been the main beneficiary of the Iraq war: Saddam Hussein’s fall from power enabled Iran to increase its influence on Iraq and establish cooperation with the major Shiite factions. Iran, mostly due to its growing nuclear program, started casting a long shadow over the Middle East with Arab states and Israel voicing concerns about actual Iranian motives. This situation had a positive impact on Syria, with Israeli analysts warning that Bashar al-Asad considered it time to reap the fruits of his successful foreign policy choices of supporting Hizbullah and his alignment with Iran.

This did not happen until recently, when Iran started looking dangerously powerful, and with Syria becoming part of the solution to the Iranian puzzle. Europeans and Americans started changing their policy towards Syria in an attempt to disconnect Syria from Iran. The argument was that if Syria ultimately chose to abandon the alliance with Iran, Iran's influence on Lebanon and the Palestinian Territories would be reduced. If this were to happen, Syria would not allow major arms supplies to transit its territory or provide Iran with a point of entry into the Arab Levant any more.

France took the lead in breaking Syrian isolation; Sarkozy hosted Syria's president as an honored guest at France's Bastille Day in July 2008. What seems to have drawn French foreign policy, apart from considerations about Iran's growing power, were commercial interests. France, following Sarkozy's initiative, aimed to re-establish contacts with Syria and Lebanon and promote French commercial enterprises. Eric Chevallier, the French Ambassador in Syria, described the French motives in developing a closer relationship with Syria during a recent interview, declaring that: "...although we [France] have a number of emblematic projects underway, we [France] think that the economic relationship does not match the excellent political dynamics and we need to work on this."

The US also responded to Syria's denial in helping Hizbullah in the 2009 Lebanese elections, although Israel, Egypt and Iraq had reportedly urged the American administration not to engage Syria. The US, along with Saudi Arabia, announced that they would return their ambassadors to Damascus, after the 2009 Lebanese elections. In addition, Fred Hoff, U.S. envoy, visited Damascus on July 15, 2009 and met with Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem. Hoff's visit was then seen as a prelude to an upcoming visit to Syria by U.S. Special Envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell.

Syria seems to presently enjoy a position of power. The economy shows slow signs of positive change although the same cannot be said about its human rights record. Amnesty International claims that in 2009 "...torture and other ill-treatment were committed with impunity" while "freedom of expression and association remained strictly controlled" in Syria. Damascus, nevertheless, feels strong enough to defer the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union, after EU officials announced, almost publicly, that a decision had been taken to sign the Agreement with Syria by the end of October 2009.

Syria is not accustomed to let other countries dictate its foreign policy: a last minute invitation to sign the EU Association Agreement in Luxemburg was not what Syrians expected after five years of waiting. Syria prefers allies who would not take an initiative without first clearing it with Damascus. Now, there are a lot of countries fulfilling these criteria. Russia, having agreed to write off most of Syria's debt from the Cold War years, agreed to sell an advanced air defense missile system to Syria. Cooperation between France and Syria has deepened, paving the way to a possible full-fledged alliance. Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries are courting Syria to join an anti-Iranian front. Relations between Syria and Iran, however, are likely to be more than a marriage of convenience. Syria has just signed a defense agreement with Iran on December 2009 which is, according to some, a response to the US' Congress consideration of two bills for new sanctions on Iran. ■

Syria in the Middle East: A Damascene spring for Arab diplomacy?

Chrysoula Toufexi

Syria's geopolitical position and web of alliances enables it to exert strong influence on regional matters. Syria can facilitate dialogue between US and Iran and become a significant stabilizing agent in Lebanon and Iraq. It also exerts control upon such non-state actors as Hamas and Hizbullah. Thus, the participation of Damascus in Middle Eastern affairs is increasingly seen by its Arab interlocutors as fundamental in order to secure stability in the region.

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The Saudi initiative highlights the realization that the isolation policy towards Syria, initiated during the G. W. Bush administration in 2005 and followed concretely by Saudi Arabia and Egypt, has failed to bring Syria within the Arab block. Instead, the outcome of this policy was to trigger Syrian defiance and strengthen economic and political ties between Syria and Iran. In addition, together with Hamas and Hizbullah, the rejectionist camp has taken a harsh stance against any prospect of an Arab-Israeli peace process. The result was to deepen inter-Arab rivalry and prevent the Arabs from establishing a unifying position to reach an agreement on a ceasefire in the Israeli Operation Cast Lead, on the flow of humanitarian aid to Gaza and on the formation of a Palestinian National Unity Government, provided that reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas could be reached.

From the diplomatic deadlock in a series of unresolved issues, Hamas and Hizbullah appear to have bolstered their legitimacy among the Arab public, while



Fatah - backed by Egypt and Saudi Arabia - came out weakened. This suggested that Egyptian and Saudi influence in the region and the moderate Arab front's stance in general might be withering, while Syria's current allies, Iran and Turkey, have boosted their strategic advantage. One way for Riyadh to reinforce its regional role in the Middle East is to achieve Arab unity, and Syria holds the key.

Syria has also reaped benefits over this process, by proving that Damascus's interests cannot be excluded from regional calculations if the Arab states want to achieve greater stability in the Middle East. It seems that Saudi Arabia is prepared to offer incentives to Syria both in terms of economic cooperation and regional influence, mainly in Lebanon and Iraq, as well as a reassertion of Syrian regional role within the path of Arab diplomacy. The first positive outcome from the Syrian-Saudi reconciliation process can be seen in Lebanon and the final breakthrough in the formation of a National Unity Government, a consensus reached to represent both Hariri's March 14 alliance and Hezbollah's party coalition, ending the deadlock of Lebanon's political crisis following the June 2009 elections. Lebanese Prime Minister Saad al Hariri is expected to visit Syria soon, signaling the beginning of a new chapter in the Syrian-Lebanese relations. Syria then is expected by the Arab states to play a constructive role via its influence over Hamas to the Egyptian mediating inter-Palestinian reconciliation.

Another prominent field of Syrian-Saudi cooperation may be unraveling in Iraq, depending on the outcome of the March 2010 parliamentary elections in the country. As the US has started to withdraw its troops from Iraq since July 2009, regional competition to fill the

power vacuum has been intensifying between Iran, Turkey, Syria and Saudi Arabia, drawing their spheres of influence along ethnic and sectarian lines. The Saudis see in Syria a significant ally in their effort to form a firm Arab presence in containing Shi'a Iranian influence in the region. The game is currently played at the Iraqi electoral battlefield. Moreover, as the country is preparing for parliamentary elections, the ability of Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki to impose security - an important component of Maliki's political credentials - is already being undermined.

Security has been the main factor of tensions between Damascus and Baghdad that have witnessed a dramatic escalation amidst a wave of bomb attacks taking place on August 19, October 25 and December 8, 2009 signaling the reoccurrence of violence in Iraq. Iraq's Prime Minister has repeatedly expelled accusations that Syria constitutes a shelter and the transit point from which foreign fighters infiltrate Iraq and has demanded from Damascus to hand over Iraqi Baathists who have found refuge in Syria and whom Baghdad suspects to be behind the attacks. Syria has denied any of these accusations stressing its efforts as well as the difficulties to secure the border between the two states. Iraqi demands to hand over Baathist figures have also been denied by the Syrian government, claiming that they are political refugees.

Nevertheless, the recent rift in Syria's relations with Iraq's government does not serve Syrian interests. Maliki's accusations against Syrian interference may have been triggered by the recent announcement of a political alliance between Saleh al-Mutlaq, leader of the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue (INFN) and Ayah Allawi's Iraqi National Movement (INM) to compete in a

cross-sectarian form in the upcoming elections. INM is a political alliance that advocates secularism and desires a strong central government in Iraq. However, opponents of the INM hold strong reservations against Mutlaq on the basis of his former Baathist identity. Allawi has maintained good relations with the Syrian regime and has called for, in an interview published in the London-based *Asharq Al-Awsat* on April 2009, the improvement of relations with Saudi Arabia as a means to maintain Iraq's "Arab and Islamic strategic depth". Moreover, Maliki has lost the support that he previously enjoyed from influential Shi'a figures backed by Iran, like Muqtada al-Sadr and top leaders in the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council (SIIC).

Saudi Arabia's support for Syria in its current crisis with Iraq comes at a time when Damascus wants to promote its regional leverage as an agent of stabilization. It seems that in Iraq, Damascus shares more common interests with Riyadh rather than with Tehran. Syria is wary of Tehran's support of Iraq's Shiite parties like the SIIC which advocates a loose federal Iraqi state and the implications that the federal approach holds for the future integrity of Iraq. Damascus is especially fearful of a partition worst-case scenario. Riyadh believes that Maliki is promoting Iranian interests and sectarianism in Iraq. His image as a leader able to uphold security has been damaged and the two Arab regimes are wary of increased sectarianism that can lead to a conflict with a spillover effect, following the full withdrawal of the Americans from the region. Particularly, Syria is concerned for the consequences that a conflict might have in relation to its Kurdish communities. Both Syria and Saudi Arabia want to see Iraqi Sunni participation in the decision-making process in Iraq and they blame

Maliki for attempts to marginalize Sunni representation in the government which is Shi'a dominated. In addition, promises for governmental and security posts that were made to the Sunni tribal leaders in return for their support against al-Qaeda insurgents have not yet materialized.

Although the Saudi focus of perceived threats is centered on the Iranian regional influence and nuclear ambitions, it seems that so far, the Syrian-Iranian alliance is not causing a hindrance to Damascus in its prospects to restore relations with its Arab neighbors. Therefore, Syria can work in strengthening ties with regional powers like Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The Syrian-Saudi partnership can work in parallel with the Syrian-Iranian cooperation, in a way that it can influence Damascus foreign policy-making to avoid spoiler tactics in Lebanon, the Palestinian Territories, or Iraq. Syria might also operate as a gateway between Arabs and Washington on the one hand and Iran on the other in order to bridge differences, especially if no positive outcome is produced by Obama's engagement policy with Iran on its nuclear program. Nevertheless, Syrian engagement in the Middle East produces some real positive momentum in ongoing processes to ease the confrontational environment over the region's crises. ■

Syria - Turkey: from animosity to amity

Elisavet Paraskeva-Gkizi

In the last few years a new era of multi-dimensional collaboration between Syria and Turkey succeeded the cold climate of 1998 and “the near state of war” between the two states. The effects of this recent cooperation are bidirectional for both states and expandable to the political and economical field, as important initiatives like the first ministerial meeting of the Syrian-Turkish High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council which took place in October 2009 at the Turkish city of Gaziantep indicate.

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Syria's isolation from the international diplomatic arena, after the Iraq war in 2003, the 2005 Hariri assassination in Lebanon, and the West's accusations of supporting terrorism forced Damascus to find ways out of this uncomfortable position and to create regional alliances in order to reinforce its profile. An example of this is the recent warming in its ties with Turkey. At the same time, Turkey's efforts to strengthen its position as a regional factor in the Middle East were a boost for its image in Europe. Turkey's AKP ruling party is a defender of Turkish religious identity so the solidarity with other Muslim states, such as Syria, serves well its priorities. Both countries benefited from these circumstances as they found themselves in a constructive coincidence.

The strategic importance of Syria in the Middle East can be essential for the desirable stability in the Arab-Israeli front and in the region in general. In March 2008 Syria hosted an Arab league summit for the promotion of peace in the Middle East and in September of the same year a four-way summit between Syria, France, Turkey and Qatar took place in the country for the same cause. Turkey is aware of Syria's central position in the area and its rapprochement policy to Damascus is evidence of that.

At the same time Damascus found in its NATO-member partner an opportunity to ameliorate its diplomatic relations with the West. Moreover, this relationship with Turkey allowed Damascus to diversify its diplomatic relations so that Damascus will not be identified with Iran only.



Origins of this influence are not only political but also economic, given that the Turkish government has invested in Syria USD \$6.3 million to support 42 projects being carried out as part of the regional cooperation program between Turkey and Syria. Turkish entrepreneurs in Syria are numerous and correspondently Syrian tourist companies are now promoting, for the first time, Turkish destinations such as Istanbul for holidays and shopping. Moreover, private Syrian universities are seeking exchange programs with Turkish institutes. In just three years the Syrian-Turkish trade doubled, reaching \$2 billion in 2008. Within this financial and political framework Turkey and Syria agreed in September 2009 to end visa

requirements between the two countries and signed a bilateral cooperation agreement (the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council Agreement) in an effort to maximize coordination between them.

It's been several years since Damascus has started to moderate its relationship with Ankara due to its strong desire to get out of the diplomatic isolation in which it had found itself in the past years. Thereby in 2004 the Syrian president Bashar al- Asad visited Ankara for the first time in Syrian history. A year later, in 2005, Syria recognized full Turkish sovereignty over the Hatay province, ending this territorial dispute with Turkey in one more rapprochement step since 1998. It was then when Turkish troops amassed near Syrian borders because of Syria's support for the Kurdish PKK organization. After strong Turkish pressure Syria ended its support for PKK, expelled Ocalan from the country and closed PKK camps in Lebanon.

Recently, the two countries decided to resolve the Kurdish problem of stateless Kurds by working together, as the developments in Iraq and the autonomy that Kurds achieved there amplified fears of an eventual similar situation in Syria and Turkey. Among the two million Syrian Kurds, four hundred thousand are stateless as they have been stripped of their citizenship since 1962. Gathered near the borders with Turkey, they carry pink ID cards which identify them as tourists.

As a result of this common decision to solve the Kurdish problem the Syrian government is carrying out a census to find out the exact number of Kurds who have migrated illegally from Turkey and Iraq and live in the country without any rights. The disagreeable state of the Kurds who live in Syria provokes international condemnation for the violation of human rights by the Syrian administration. The Kurds who participate in the census are being told that they will be given citizenship, and the authorities have also promised to introduce new legislation that will give them more rights to practice Kurdish cultural and religious customs. Furthermore, Ankara recognized full citizenship for 34 PKK militants and gave hope to Syria that Turkey will admit a significant number of stateless Kurds.

Turkish intercession in Syria's international affairs commenced in May 2008. At that time Syria and Israel started indirect peace talks through the mediation of Turkey in an attempt to find a peaceful solution for the Golan Heights, which are now under Israeli occupation. However the negotiations stopped after Israel's attack against Hamas in Gaza, and haven't resumed since then.

Another important indication of rapprochement was a joint military exercise in April 2009. It was the first time that the two countries militarily joined together, a fact that sent a strong message to Washington and Israel as it made the Turkish intention for good relations with its Arab-Muslim neighbors clear. It is the first time an Arab state has had a joint exercise with a NATO member state. It is certain that a strong relationship between Turkey and Arab -Muslims states makes Israel anxious as it confronts a disturbing situation: its former strategic partner in the region is now approaching Israel's adversary.

The strong relationship with Turkey enforces the Syrian desire for a different treatment from both the US and EU. As a matter of fact, the US and the EU started to have closer links with Syria lately. Even though some of the differences between Syria and Turkey may impinge on their core interests, such as the ambitious Turkish plans regarding Euphrates waters which are detrimental to Syria's interests, both are inclined, and Syria especially so, to put aside their differences.

In conclusion, the declarations from both sides about "best friendship" and good-neighbor relations indicate the new positive era in their bilateral dealings. Under Ahmet Davutoglu's "strategic depth" doctrine, which favors Turkey's active political, cultural and economic presence in the Middle East, Syria represents for Turkey the gate to the region. For Syria also, Turkey is the much-needed link to the West. It is certain that the political and economic benefits which the two countries will have from an even more constructive cooperation will be vast, and that will be a serious obstacle to an eventual interruption of this promising relationship. ■

The role of Syria in the Arab-Israeli *Peace process*

Maria Abdel-Rahim

The Israeli-Syrian affair has regained momentum during the last months of 2009, through calls from both the Turkish and French leaderships to revive the intermediated talks aiming at peace negotiations between Tel-Aviv and Damascus. The renewed efforts seem to reflect a fresh mindset to the Arab-Israeli peace process promoted by the new US engagement policy in the Middle East. Obstacles however still remain and threaten to derail the ongoing process.

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tions of launching a new diplomatic era for the Middle East, based on engagement and dialogue. In the meantime, Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad is also trying to improve his ties with regional powers of the Middle East, searching for new alliances within the moderate Arab camp, and especially with Saudi Arabia.

Since 2005, and mostly under the George W. Bush administration, Damascus had been increasingly isolated, condemned for its ties with Iran and blamed for its alleged support towards insurgents in Iraq

Syrria remains the key for a comprehensive Arab-Israeli peace process to move forward; this is considered the cardinal component of the engagement approach, initiated by the Obama administration as soon as the new president took office. The new American administration has expressed its inten-

and its interference in Lebanon's internal affairs. Viewing the US and Israel as aggressive imperial forces, Damascus seems to be using its Iranian ally to advance its strategic leverage in the region. Asad's regime would also take advantage of its proxies,

Hamas and Hezbollah, to inflict pressure on Israel without direct implications for Syria. Nevertheless, Syria's attitude caused troubles in its relationship between its regime and the US, and with key US regional allies, namely Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Moreover, the Israeli seizure of the Golan Heights in the 1967 Six Day War pushed Damascus to adopt a rejectionist attitude towards a peace prospect with Israel. Against the backdrop of its regional and international isolation, Syria decided in May 2008 to disclose its participation in secret, indirect talks with Israel (mediated by Turkey since February 2007). The four indirect rounds of talks had been aiming for a comprehensive peace agreement and revolved around Syria's call for a full restoration of the Golan Heights currently under Israeli occupation since 1967. An initial positive sign towards rapprochement was that the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, E. Olmert, was willing to negotiate the Golan Heights under the condition that Damascus would weaken ties with Iran and the resistant movements of Hamas and Hezbollah; but it soon faltered. The progress of negotiations under Turkish mediation froze, following Olmert's resignation from office and Israel's three-week offensive against Hamas in Gaza starting in December 27, 2008. Negotiations reached a deadlock when the Syrian side withdrew from the talks in protest of the Israeli attack in Gaza.

Gradually, this setback created deeper divisions among Arab states undermining diplomatic efforts to reach a consensus in response to the Gaza raid. The moderate Arab front, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan (with the support of the US) pressed for an Egyptian-mediated ceasefire to be reached between the Palestinian Authority and Israel, while holding Hamas

responsible for the conflict escalation. On the other camp stood Syria and Iran, who threw their weight behind Hamas. Syria excluded any possibility of resuming talks with Israel and denounced the Saudi Middle East Peace Plan proposed in 2002. The deepening of inter-Arab rivalry between the rejectionist and moderate camps led Arab diplomacy to a stalemate. Most importantly, it hindered Egyptian efforts to mediate between the two Palestinian factions of Fatah and Hamas. This negative atmosphere was confirmed in a series of Arab meetings launched last year, which ended with tentative results for the Middle East peace process.

Israel's relations with Turkey also deteriorated following Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's condemnation of the Israeli military operations in Gaza, in the World Economic Forum Summit at Davos in January 2009. This obscured the prospects of a revival of the Turkish-led mediation effort. The most recent rift in the bilateral relations of the two states came when Turkey denied authorization for the Israeli aircrafts to participate in the annual joint-NATO air defense exercise that was scheduled to take place between 12 and 23 October, 2009 in protest of Israeli policy in Gaza. Following this rift, Israel has cast doubts on Turkey's ability to act as an "honest broker", according to Netanyahu's comment, despite Ankara's repeated announcements of its intentions to resume its mediating role. Israeli officials have claimed that mediation under Turkey's auspices caused deterioration on the bilateral relations of the two states and have denounced the whole effort. Moreover they warn that Syria should not be the basic denominator in Turkish-Israeli ties.

Instead, Netanyahu has turned to France, after President Sarkozy stepped forward, proposing a renewal of the Syrian-Israeli talks under French mediation. The Israeli Prime Minister went even further to support direct talks with Syria as a possible course to move onwards. In November 2009 the two leaders, Netanyahu and Asad met with the French President in separate meetings. The Syrian President in his meeting with his French counterpart underlined the significance of the French contribution to any eventual Israeli-Syrian discussion, but only in a supporting role to the Turkish mediation. Contrary to Israel's relations with Ankara, the Turkish-Syrian strategic partnership has been advancing in unprecedented levels. The Turkish Prime Minister R.T. Erdogan made an official visit to Damascus on December 22 for talks with Asad about the prospect of rapprochement with Israel. Moreover, the Egyptian newspaper Al-Ahram reported that Turkey is planning to resume its mediating position in negotiations in the first half of 2010, from where they were left off.

However, the prospects for a negotiation revival between Syria and Israel find specific obstacles in their way. The more recent referendum bill with reference to the Golan Heights might put a test on the Prime Minister's will to move forward his negotiations with Syria, as Defence Minister Ehud Barak pointed out according to the Israeli newspaper Jerusalem Post. Syria's links with the organizations of Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza continue to constitute a barrier in the development of negotiations. According to a report issued by the Tel Aviv-based Institute of National Security Studies, Israel is concerned about the increase in advanced missile purchases in Syria and Iran and fears

the advanced missile supply to Hezbollah from Syria.

Any progress on the Syrian-Israeli track could help US-Syrian dialogue to move forward. The Syrian President stated in 2008 that Syria would participate in direct talks with Israel under US sponsorship once the G.W. Bush administration would be replaced by a new one. However, the meeting between the American President Barack Obama and the Syrian President Bashar Al-Asad in November 2009 did not leave much promise. Nevertheless, the revival of peace initiatives in the last months of 2009 by Turkish and French officials can bring a positive impetus to the Syrian-Israeli peace track, a development that is perceived to be crucial for any progress in the larger Middle East peace process. ■

Greek-Syrian economic relations: Discovering a new field

Christos Kyriakidis



The economic and trade relations between Greece and Syria have had many ups and downs. In a course of twenty years their bilateral economic ties have been strengthened at times, while declining at others. This article examines the development of the relations between the two countries, focusing particularly on the past five years.

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The strategy adopted by the Syrian Ministry of Economy and Trade and its affiliated departments in the beginning of the new millennium underlined the development of Syrian economy along the lines of an open-door policy, confronting internal and external challenges. It was followed by a five-year plan, which was remodeled to suit the economic reform program of Syria, putting an end to the import restrictions for a wide variety of goods. The plan aimed for the development of legislations that would allow Syrian economy to match the global investment environment (initiating a stock market in harmony with the up-to-date international banking and stock exchange systems) and on ushering balance between the internal and external trading policies. As a result of this plan for an open economy, which spanned the period 2001- 2005, the trade balance between Greece and Syria showed positive signs and the bilateral trade in the years from 2003 to 2006 was doubled compared to that of 2003, amounting to 180 million Euro of Greek exports to Syria and approximately 19 million Euro from Syrian exports to Greece.

Syria tried to implement its ambitious policy of integration into the international economic system, which would eventually give the country the financial boost that was needed. The objective was originated by the aforementioned policy, which sought safety and economic growth through cooperation with international financial systems and international capital. Additionally, economic growth would be achieved through the continuous expan-

sion of bilateral economic relations with EU countries such as Greece, Germany, Italy and further cooperation with Syria's neighboring states such as Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and others.

Despite the efforts to liberalize its economy, however, the Syrian government had not proceeded with the necessary reforms to gradually transform the centralized economic system. Thus European investors accused Syria of lack of transparency during the application of its new economic policy. Moreover, difficulties rose from a series of non-tariff barriers, such as the lengthy and complicated bureaucratic procedures. The existence of delays in the release of performance for domestic projects, in conjunction with the existence of high consular charges and the high barriers on transports complete the rather bleak picture of the current state of Syrian economic and commercial affairs.

As for Greek-Syrian trade relations, the existing barriers in the trade sector (such as high tariffs and restrictions on imports, a lack of strong trade links between the business communities of the two countries, and the ban on imports, until recently, for a considerable number of goods) significantly lower production costs of Syrian industries, hindered the trade relationship between the two countries. Nonetheless, they did eventually mend their bilateral cooperation in trade by signing a series of agreements in the last five years, in the sectors of transport, trade, and direct foreign investment.

The prospect of commercial activity by the Greek business community of Syria within the local market is looking more positive recently. Greece saw that it could benefit from various sources of investment in Syria, mostly due to the cheap labor provided in the country and the slow, but steady liberalization of the economy. More importantly, the implementation of new legislative measures such as the inclusion of companies operating in the country in a single tax law and the unrestricted repatriation of profits further facilitated mutual trade between Syria and Greece. As a consequence of such measures, a series of Ministerial decisions in 2007 removed many products from the list of non-licensed goods. This signified a turning point, as the ban on importing items formerly prohibited by Syrian legislation due to economic, political, social and religious factors was finally lifted. The Ministry of Economy and Foreign Trade announced in April 2008 the abolition of that list, thus creating steadier trade facilitation between the two countries. Moreover the initialization of the Association Agreement by the EU at the end of 2008 was expected to offer Syria significant benefits to the areas of foreign direct investments (FDI).

Nonetheless, the upward mobility in bilateral trade did not continue its development in the following years. In 2008 the volume of mutual trade had fluctuated by 42.1 million Euros after several years of surplus balances. The reduction of competitiveness for Greek products into the Syrian market and the application of the Free Trade Agreement (GAFTA) signed by Syria with other Arab countries and with Turkey as well (by early 2007) strengthened multilateral trade and the investments from the respective countries and limited the size of Greek exports in Syria. The Arab Free Trade Agreement, which came into effect on 01/01/2005, provided that goods of Arab origin and products from outside of this foreign trade agreement with more than 40% added value will be freely imported into Syria. This development gradually led the country into gaining more profit by obtaining the privileges offered by the Free Trade Agreement, since the exported Greek products did not compete on equal terms with goods of Arab origin. In contrast, Greece's growing imports of petroleum products and the increasing competitiveness of the favorable exchange rate of the Syrian pound to the Euro doubled (229%) the imports of Syrian

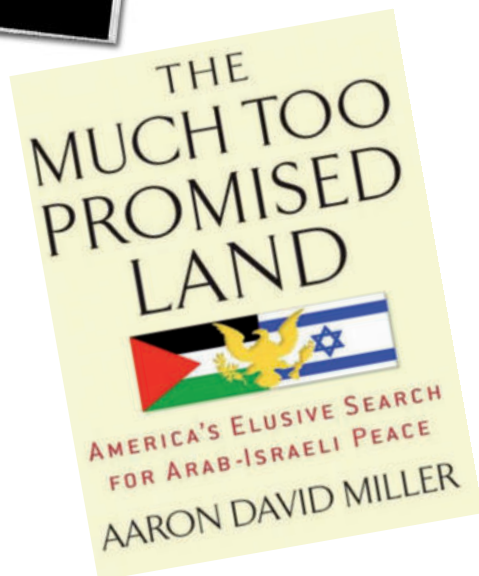
products into the Greek market. Therefore the trade and economic relations between those countries remained stagnant, since the current economic crisis was not favorable enough for the development of mutual trade.

Finally, the liberalization of the Syrian market and the goal set by its government into making it a regional trade platform - accessible to both European and Arab investors - is a fact that deserves notice. This plan should prompt Greek exporters to preserve and strengthen long-standing partnerships with the Syrian market. Greek and European exporters are now required to examine, analyze and cooperate with the Syrian government. By converting a 'state vendor' into a 'co-producer state' exporters and investors can secure benefits from the movement of consumer goods into the wider Middle East. Syria tries to attract as many commercial and financial investments as it can from Greece (and the rest of Europe) and wishes to provide them not only with a market limited to the borders of the specific country but to a wider Middle Eastern market. Free-trade zone agreements are thus a conduit through which foreign investors will gain free access to consumer goods not only in Syria, but beyond it, into the other Arab countries which are now part of the Free-Trade Area. ■



The Much Too Promised Land

By Aaron David Miller, Bantam Books, New York, 2008
Olga Dalaka



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Aaron David Miller, former US Middle East advisor and negotiator, wrote a historical analysis of American diplomacy in the Arab-Israeli peace process. Miller sets out to record the history of negotiations based on his personal involvement. His book contains a variety of anecdotes and portraits of the leading personas. Each of the four parts is dedicated to the fate of the American promise of achieving peace in the 'much too promised land'.

The first part of the book is about the above promise being challenged. The first challenge the USA faces is its image as a great power and the impact this has on the Arab world. Miller describes how American authority can shrink when brokering a deal in the Middle Eastern world and how, given that the cooperation of small powers is important for making any progress, occasionally minor powers have disproportionately large influence in the peace process. Moreover, the sense of smallness and vulnerability affects both Israel, being located in a hostile neighbourhood, and the Palestinians, being viewed by others as homeless refugees or, even worse, terrorists. These

actors, including other Arab states that have a role in the peace process, usually have no other items in their arsenal other than the political manoeuvres they use to reject or modify US proposals, making negotiations harder. Therefore, Miller sets out to highlight the importance of regional states as being able to compromise the sovereignty of the US in the region.

The other major US challenge that is brought up in this work is America's own domestic politics. It is well known that domestic politics influence the American perception of Arabs and the Israeli state. In particular, Miller examines the close ties between Israel and the USA and their scepticism regarding Arabic

mentality and political culture, reaching the conclusion that there is indeed a special relationship between Israel and the USA. Nevertheless, this is not about any kind of conspiracy. The close ties derive from an 'American feeling' that they have more in common with Israel, such as values and post 9/11 common enemies. Nonetheless, Miller argues that domestic pressures such as the American Jewish community and the pro-Israeli lobbies may affect but not always determine the political choices.

The second part of the book describes the three cases in which the American promise has been kept, through the successful efforts of three different personalities; Henry Kissinger, President Carter and James Baker. Kissinger had a strategy adjusted to Cold-War reality and was supported by President Nixon. During the Yom Kippur War in 1973 this strategy confirmed America's credibility in the Middle East. At the same time Kissinger avoided being held hostage to Israel's interests or letting the Soviets benefit from the crisis. Jimmy Carter was the president that made the Middle Eastern peace process a personal mission. Carter overcame the obstacles of domestic politics and brought Israel and Egypt toward a peace treaty in Camp David in 1978. James Baker, backed by President Bush Sr., managed to bring Arabs and Israelis at the Madrid conference table shortly after Iraq's invasion in Kuwait in 1990. Although Madrid didn't change Middle Eastern realities it was a significant forum in that the Palestinians participated as political interlocutors.

In the third part, Miller analyses the Clinton presidency and its failure to enhance the peace process. According to Miller, Clinton failed to preserve the past presidencies' gains. Since Bush and Baker had somewhat spoiled relations with Israel and the American Jewish community, Clinton was eager to maintain good relations with both of them and wouldn't follow these

steps. The new operational concept was to regain and strengthen Israel's confidence, which weakened the US role as a mediator. Instead of criticizing Clinton's weak efforts, Miller recognises his initiative at the Wye River summit in 1998 as a diplomatic masterpiece. Giving priority to less contradictory, interim issues Clinton brought Arafat and Netanyahu to sign an agreement.

Even so, Miller carries on criticizing the lost opportunities of the Clinton presidency. His most important point is the failure of Camp David 2000. According to Miller, Israeli Prime Minister Barak's eagerness to reach an agreement toward peace was not enough to secure any progress due to the Palestinian's huge demands and unwillingness to compromise. Miller points out that the US administration could have run the summit more constructively, had it held a more interventionist role. Through a detailed description Miller blames the failure on the lack of a sustained strategy, the time pressure, the general misperception of what the chances were and the poor Arab support on the initiative. In quite a mild manner, he praises Clinton's charisma and commitment but at the same time he suggests that his lack of toughness is one of the reasons why the peace process didn't evolve as its potential allowed it to during Camp David.

The final part is Miller's question on whether America has abandoned the peace process. As he claims, George Bush Jr. inherited the Arab-Israeli issue at a very bad point and cites that Bush never had the intention of getting involved in this 'loser issue'. Miller then explains the impact that the 9/11 attacks had on the US involvement in the Middle East. After 9/11 Bush became much more of a war president instead of a propagator of peace. While diplomacy was not enough for American security any more, Bush was under pressure from his Arab and European allies to take some kind of initiative in responding to the region's escalating

violence. Being engaged in Iraq and Afghanistan, Bush followed a different route of much stronger presence in the Middle East, synchronizing it to his war against terrorism and far away from peace conferences. His presence included speeches and no-framework proposals that, as Miller claims, reflected an effort to avoid engagement and shift responsibility onto others.

Miller closes his book with recommendations on how America can save the last chance of Arab-Israeli peace. He explains that 9/11 became the new dynamic in steering US strategy toward the Middle East, which still continues to be very much in place. Afghanistan and Iraq operations put US interests deep into the Middle East. Miller advises that success in Middle East will have to be about serious engagement, patience and risk-taking. Stability in Palestine and cooperation with Arab states through regional links seem to be the answer that the USA must be seeking.

'The Much Too Promised Land' is not aimed to be an academic analysis about the Middle East and the USA. Miller examines the facts not based on some theoretical case but by describing his own experiences during the process. What the reader is offered is a loose, accessible narration consisting of interviews, memories and personal testimonies which are tied together in illuminating the peace-making process from within. In this way, Miller introduces the reader to the views held by the State Department on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Being an American Jew himself, he offers a presentation of both liberal and conservative positions of the administration members, the lobbies and other think-tanks in the USA. Thus, he ultimately shows that these beliefs, along with American political interests, shape US policies considering peace and other matters Middle Eastern. ■



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